

*The V A N I T Y of M A N.*

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A

# S E R M O N

Preached at  
BISHOPS-CASTLE,

I N T H E

County of *SALOP*;  
SUNDAY Afternoon, *May* the  
*24<sup>th</sup>, 1741.*

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BY THE  
Rev. Mr. *RICHARD MASON*;  
Gentleman Commoner of *Mag. Coll. Oxon.*

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## PSALM viii. ver. 4.

*What is Man that thou art mindful of him ? and the Son of Man, that thou visitest him ?*



THE holy King and Prophet, contemplating the stupendous Majesty and Power of the great Creator, makes a natural Reflection on the ineffable Difference between God and his poor Creature Man ; which Contemplation lays before him the wonderful Mercy of the Almighty, who vouchsafes to think of, and visit him either with his Blessings, to reward his Obedience ; or with Inflections, when deviated from the Paths of Righteousness, to bring him back into the right Way and prevent his perishing.

These Meditations make him break out into Admiration, *What is Man, &c?* And indeed, if we consider ourselves in a true Light, what are we but a Shadow ? meer Vanity, as the same Prophet observes in another Place, *Man is like to Vanity : his Days are as a Shadow that passeth away.* Psal. cxliv. ver. 4. Again, *We bring our Years to an End, as it were a Tale that is told.* *The Days of our Age are*

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*Three-score Years and ten, and though Men  
be so strong, that they come to Four-score Years,  
yet is their strength then but Labour and Sor-  
row ; so soon passeth it away, and we are  
gone. Ps. xc. ver. 9, 10.*

Thomas à Kempis, an excellent Divine, reflecting on the Miseries attendant on human Life, says, very justly, the Days of this Life are short and evil, full of Sorrow and Anguish, wherein Man is defiled with many Sins, encumber'd with many Passions, disquieted with many Cares, distracted with many Curiosities, entangled with many Vanities, encompassed about with many Errors, worn with many Labours, vexed with many Temptations, weakened with Pleasures, and tormented with Want.

The Ancients compared Man to Grafs and the Flower of the Field, to a Bubble, a Puff of Wind, to Froth and to Chaff. Ἀνθρώποις ωσὶ γόργοις οὐ κανδός τε αγέται, μορφῶντες τρίνα αὔρούς οὐ καχίν. — And can we say, when we reflect upon Eternity, that we are not as Grafs or a Flower, which springs up and no sooner comes to Perfection, but is cut down or withers ; as a Bubble of Water, which scarce appears but it breaks and vanishes ; as a Puff of Wind, which is heard, passes and is forgot ; as Froth, which falls almost as soon as raised ; as Chaff which is carried away with the Wind, and is never more seen, or thought worth enquiring after.

What

What is all the Pomp and Grandeur of this World, Conquests and Renown ? a short Dream. What is Power ? Weakness. What our Knowledge ? Ignorance. What our Riches ? Poverty. When we look to the eternal Cause of Causes, how contemptible must every thing we glory in appear ! how despicable must we esteem ourselves ! Did Mankind give into mature Reflection on what they are, how perishable ; how soon forgot, it would put an End to their Ambition, and humble their Pride. How many have there been, who anxious to perpetuate their Names, have made their Lives miserable, yet are now entirely swallowed up in Oblivion ? And those whose Names have survived many Ages, since their Departure hence, what Recompence is it for the Dangers they ran ; the Care they were tormented with ? Are they sensible that their Actions are mentioned with Honour to their Memory ? No, the Grave separates us from the World, with which we have no longer Commerce : We are there ignorant of what passes among Men. But, suppose the contrary ; the Soul, if happy, is above the Applause of momentary Mortals : if miserable, 'tis too much engrossed by Torments, to be anxious for, or, even, think of surviving Fame.

The Words of my Text naturally furnish the four following Heads for Reflection.

First,

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First, Whence we are ?  
Secondly, Whither we go ?  
Thirdly, What we are ?  
Fourthly, What we shall be ?

First, Whence we are ? Man originally is from the Dust. *And the Lord God formed Man of the Dust of the Ground.* Gen. ch. ii. ver. 7. And as every thing is reducible to its first Principle, according to the Philosophers, so Man must again return to his, as God passed Sentence upon him. *In the Sweat of thy Face shalt thou eat Bread, till thou return unto the Ground ; for out of it wast thou taken : for Dust thou art, and unto Dust shalt thou return,* Gen. iii. ver. 19. Job also tells us in the 34th chap. ver. 15. *Man shall turn again unto Dust ; having an Eye to the Curse of God upon our Progenitor Adam.* Thus much as to whence we are originally. Derivatively we are from Sinners. *Behold, says holy David, I was shapen in Iniquity, and in Sin did my Mother conceive me.* Ps. li. ver. 5. We exist by the absolute Will and incessant Protection of the Almighty, who formed us and breathing into the lifeless Dust it became a living Soul. Gen. ii. ver. 7. When we consider the Meanness of our Original, and the Sin in which we were born, which subjects us to be the Companions of accursed Spirits, and to be doomed to eternal Darkness and a living Death, if

if we are not regenerated, we shall become more humble ; the high conceit of ourselves and the Contempt of others will be entirely extinguished, and we shall learn Resignation to God ; Patience, Forbearance, Long-Suffering, and brotherly Love, with regard to Men.

When we are moved with Passion, when our Hearts are swoln with Pride, when our Minds are puffed up with a high Conceit of our own Perfections, when we glory in our Knowledge, when we are vain of our Beauty, when we despise others for their Ignorance or Deformity, when we harbour Revenge in our Breasts against our Neighbour, or dare, for any Losses, Disappointments, or even the severest Inflictions, murmur against and accuse Heaven of Severity : Let us look back to our Original ; call to mind whence we sprang, and reflect that we shall very soon become a putrid and loathsom Corps, intolerable to those who shall survive us : And for that Reason be covered with Earth and return to our primitive Dust ; and this Retrospection from whence we are, on the one Hand, and the Reflection on what we soon shall be on the other, will prove a Remedy for our Pride, Passions and Impatience. Let us, with *Job*, consider this seriously, and each Individual will say with him, *My Flesh is clothed with Worms and Clods of Dust.* Job vii. ver. 5. *All Flesh shall perish together, and Man shall turn again unto Dust.* Job xxxiv. ver. 15. *I have said to Corruption,*

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*tion, Thou art my Father ; to the Worm, Thou art my Mother and my Sister.* Job xvii. ver. 14. Such is the haughty Man, who proud of his Birth and elated with Titles, despises those who cannot reckon a Number of Ancestors, distinguished by high Posts and Dignities, or because such Objects of his Contempt are labouring under Wants, or are not equally wealthy. Let such an one look upon himself with an impartial Eye, and view his noble Extraction from the Dust of the Earth ; and then say in what he has Cause to glory ! We are all ; Rich and Poor, King and Beggar, of one and the same Composition. We are all shapen in Sin, conceived in Iniquity, and are all condemned by the same Sentence. Virtue alone, a good Life, and the conquest over ourselves, in subduing our irregular Passions, do or ought to make the only Distinction between Man and Man : Not that I impeach the Rewards of distinguished Virtue in Titles and Posts of Honour ; but as these are inherited, so ought they who derive them from their Ancestors, also to inherit the Virtues by which they were obtained : or these temporary Advantages only by setting such Men higher, expose their Vices more to View. Let me therefore advise the Great to shew they are not degenerated by Affability and Humanity ; the Rich, that they deserve the Wealth they possess by Liberality and Charity ; and let those who are in the highest Posts convince the World, they could not be more worthily filled by

by Justice, and a disinterested publick Spirit. In a Word, let us all bear in Mind to what End we have the Loan of Life; namely, that we may secure a blessed Eternity, and that we may act like rational Creatures, in securing this inestimable Good, let us often put this Question to ourselves, which is my

Second Head, Whither do we go?

The very Minute we came into the World we began our Journey to the Grave; we sat out for the Goal of Death, to which we gradually draw near. Moments rise to Minutes; Minutes to Hours; Hours to Days; Days to Weeks; Weeks to Months; Months to Years: and every, the minutest, Particle of Time pushes us on, and advances us in our Journey. Every setting Sun reminds us we have a Day less to live, and that we also must decline and vanish from the Eyes of the World, never again to appear, never more to be reckoned in the Number of the Living: wherefore we ought to prepare, wisely, for a future State; nay, even, he that doubts future Retributions, if he is endowed with Prudence, ought to live as if he had no Doubt, that he may not suffer by the Certainty: If there is no Hereafter, no future Reckoning, he can lose nothing by having lived rationally; by which I mean, virtuously: But on the contrary, if there is, as all wise Men have acknowledged, even among the Heathens, a vicious

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Course of Life makes his Death terrible, and his future Situation miserable. Whereas, he whose Hopes are fixed on a blessed Eternity, neither fears nor feels Death ; which alone, in this World, is certain : Such a Man will make the Thoughts of his Dissolution easy to him, by looking beyond it on the Glory to which it leads ; for as Life gives way to Death, so Death makes way for Life : If Death takes from us a momentary precarious Life, it amply rewards us by giving a Life immortal.

As we are borne away with the Tide of Time to the Valley of Death, where there is no repenting of Crimes or Follies past, which we can only do in our Passage through this World, and as after Death comes Judgment, it behoves us seriously and incessantly to think on whither we go, and to live so circumspectly as neither to be surprised at, or afraid of the great Change, when we shall put off Mortality and be cloathed with Immortality : at which Time, what will avail us all our past Pleasures, all worldly Pomp and Grandeur : Our Wealth and Power ? Nothing : On the contrary, they will make our parting with them grievous, if our Hearts have been too much set upon them, they will be as many Chains that bind our Affections to this World, which however the Power of Death will break in funder. We shall be unwilling to be sequestred from them, and the irreversible Decree

cree will fill us with inconceivable Anguish and Bitterness of Soul. We shall think on the Use we have made of them with panick Fears, and apprehend the Account we are summoned to give at the Tribunal of a just and tremendous God : Whereas, he who daily thinks on whither he is going, whither he must inevitably go, will, in such a Manner, comport himself, as to look upon Death rather a friendly Deliverer than the King of Terrors, which, indeed, he is to the Wicked only : This prudent, whom I term the good Man, at his last Hour, may exclaim, *O Death, where is thy Sting ? O Grave, where is thy Victory ?* 1 Cor. ch. xv. ver. 55. Far from being terrified he will rejoice at it's Approach : His own Conscience will disarm this Leveller of all Mankind, take from him his Sting, and make this Servant of the Living God, triumph over the Grave.

We ought not to bewail our being mortal, but Sin which made us so. Man was at first created to be conditionally immortal : but Sin made him miserable : It was, therefore, Mercy made us mortal, *ne æternum essemus miseri* ; that we might not be for ever miserable, as we must have been without Death.

To die is to be no more unhappy, if we have made a good Use of Life : it is but Breath departed from dead Earth, at first, enlivened by Breath breathed into it. The Philosophers among the Heathens ever e-

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steemed Death a desirable Good, as it was a Passage to a better Place. *Cato* the Senator said, *Si Deus mihi largiatur ut repuerascam valde recusem, nec tum me vixisse pœnitet, quia bene vixi; nec timeo mori quia ex hospitio, non domo, discedam.* That if God would give him Power to renew his Youth, he should be very far from employing it, though neither should he be sorry that he had existed, because he was conscious he had lived well; neither was he afraid to die, as by Death he did not leave his House, but an Inn only. By which it is plain, this virtuous Heathen looked upon this Life no other than a Passage to a better, to which Death would give him Admittance. *Seneca* being asked *quid est mors?* What is Death? answered, *aut finis aut transitus.* Tis either a final End, or a Passage. But it is a Decree irrevocable, that all Flesh shall die: Wherefore let us constantly bear in Mind, that every Moment brings us nearer to the Execution of that Sentence; and that we shall *all*, sooner or later, take up our Rests in the Grave, whither we are journeying in Company; and let the Reflection of *whither we go* make us prepare for it, in such a Manner, that we may esteem the Moment which separates us from this World, the time of greatest Comfort, as it puts an End to the Miseries inseparable from this Vale of Tears; opens to us the Gates of immortal Life, and crowns us with endless Glory. It will greatly

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contribute to our leading Lives which will assure to us this blessed Futurity, if we incessantly and seriously consider my

Third Head, What we are ?

This Consideration will so manifestly set before us our own Nothingness, that we shall join the Holy Prophet in his Exclamation, *What is Man, that thou art mindful of him? and the Son of Man that thou visitest him?*

That we are endowed with a rational Soul, and capable of Immortality, is the only one Point in which we excel the brute Creation; for as to the Body, many of them have the Advantage over us, we are weak crazy Beings; a Composition of Breath and Dust; subject to numberless Distempers; impure in the very Womb, condemned to Death before we were born; naturally unclean in our Bodies; vile in our Quality; our Weight lighter than Vanity, and proud of Imperfection: Our Being is indeed no more than a troublesome Dream; we are born weeping, live encompassed with Sorrows, and die grieving: This is a true Estimate of human Life. Notwithstanding we are endowed with Reason, yet are we so importuned by our Passions, that we act contrary to it, and may be shamed by Insects, which proceed more providently. We know that this World is not our resting Place, that we are here in a State of Probation; that Time lost is irretrievable; that we are posting to

to the Grave, which will keep us in Custody till it delivers us up to Judgment ; that we shall at the last receive a Sentence according to the Lives we have led on Earth, and that such will be irrevocable ; yet do we live, as if ignorant of all these infallible Truths ; as if we imagined ourselves the Favourites of Heaven, and brought into the World only to indulge to our sensual Appetites : What miserable Wretches are we, who allured by present Enjoyments, can be unmoved with the Terrors of a dreadful Eternity, and seeing will not see ? We are daily admonished by our inward Monitor ; Conscience, incessantly calls upon, and lays before us our Danger ; but, we rather endeavour to silence it's Clamours, than profit by it's Remonstrances, and one would judge that we were in love with Perdition.

Let us, my Beloved, as we are distinguished by Reason, act for the Time to come, like rational Creatures ; consider the Frailty of our Nature ; the many Casualties to which we are subject ; the Certainty of Death ; the Uncertainty of the time we shall die ; what must necessarily follow on our leaving this World ; rouze from this Lethargy of Sin and Folly, and awake to Prudence.

Would the haughty Man thus consider what he really is, what a momentary, poor, crazy, declining Creature ; who depends entirely on the Mercies of his Creator for his longer Existence ; it would allay all presumptuous

tuous Thoughts, and make him look with another Eye on that Part of Mankind, his Kindred Dust, whom he now despises. What (as I have before observed) are Power, Riches, or Titles, but Accidents, of which we have only a permissive Fruition? One Man depends upon another, or upon a Number; and the greatest Prince, however securely his Dominion seems to be established, however just is his Title, however mild his Government, is liable to become as wretched as the most abject of his People, by unforeseen and innumerable Accidents. Of this Truth, we have Numbers of Examples in the Histories of all Nations.

From the greatest Monarch to the meanest Peasant, we are poor, uncertain, transitory Creatures, every Moment hastening to our first Principle, Dust: We carry about a perishable Body, which decays even by the Means of its Preservation, and will soon crumble into Atoms, like the Bodies of irrational Creatures. 'Tis then, that we shall reap the Benefit of the Distinction between them and us, if we have made a right Use of that distinguishing Faculty, Reason, given by the merciful and All-wise Creator, so to guide our Ways in this Journey of Life, as at the End to bring us to a blessed Immortality: But, if on the contrary, forgetful of what we are, we blindly follow the Dictates of our Passions, and inordinate Desires; Death will bring

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bring us to such a Scene of everlasting Woe, that we shall envy the Beasts which perish with their Bodies, and wish we had rather been the most contemptible Reptile upon Earth, than the Victim of our Folly in endless Misery. I now proceed to my

### Fourth and last Head, What we shall be?

As to our Bodies, they will, as I have already shewn, be immediately turn'd to Dust, the Principle of their Being. Though they will, mediately, be glorified; the Atoms of which they are form'd, will be again re-united and joined to the Soul, and be conducted by Angels to the Eternal Mansions of everlasting Bliss, if we are entitled to this unspeakable Mercy, by having squared our Lives to the Conditions of the Gospel-Covenant, on which alone the Great God has been pleased to promise it; but though our Bodies shall accompany our Souls to Heaven, they will then be divested of all Passions; and notwithstanding these identical Flesh, Blood and Bones, shall be received into the Celestial Choirs, as Job says, *And though after my Skin Worms destroy this Body, yet in my Flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for my self, and mine Eyes shall behold, and not another; though my Reins be consumed within me.* Job xix. ver. 26, 27. Notwithstanding, I say, this very Body, which we now carry about with us, shall be received into Heaven, yet will it be

so purified, so changed in the twinkling of an Eye, as to be worthy of Admittance in those immaculate Realms of resplendent Light, endless Life, and ineffable Glory. For St. Paul; when he says in the 15th Chapter of his first Epistle to the *Corinthians*, That *Flesh and Blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God*; explains himself, both in the subsequent Verses in this Chapter, and in *Philippians* Chapter iii. ver. 20, 21. By which he gives us to understand, that by Flesh and Blood, he means such as are our Bodies here on Earth; attended and polluted by our earthly Desires and irregular Passions. These are his Words,

“ Now this I say, Brethren, that *Flesh and Blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God* ;  
“ neither doth *Corruption inherit Incorruption*. Behold, I shew you a Mystery ; we  
“ shall not all sleep, but we shall all be chan-  
“ ged, in a Moment, in the twinkling of an  
“ Eye, at the last Trump, (for the Trumpet  
“ shall sound) and the Dead shall be raised in-  
“ corruptible ; and we shall be changed. For  
“ this corruptible must put on Incorruption, and  
“ this mortal must put on Immortality. 1 Cor.  
“ ch. xv. ver. 50, 51, 52, 53. For our Conver-  
“ sation is in Heaven, from whence also we  
“ look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ :  
“ Who shall change our vile Body, that it may  
“ be fashioned like unto his glorious Body. Phil-  
“ lipians chap. iii. ver. 20, 21.” And we  
learn by St. Matt. ch. xvii. ver. 2. that our

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blessed Redeemer appeared as bright and glorious as the Sun, when he was transfigured : Our Bodies will therefore become lucid and environ'd with Glory, and tho' it is not here manifested to us what we shall be, yet may we be assured, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Our blessed Saviour himself speaking of the last Judgment, says : *Then shall the Righteous shine forth as the Sun, in the Kingdom of their Father.* Mat. xiii. ver. 43. which was also prophesied by *Daniel*, *And many of them that sleep in the Dust of the Earth shall awake, some to everlasting Life, and some to Shame and everlasting Contempt:* *And they that be wise shall shine as the Brightness of the Firmament, and they that turn many to Righteousness, as the Stars for ever and ever.* Dan. xii. ver. 2, 3.

If any Person should idly ask, how these scattered Atoms dispersed over the Face of the Earth, or this Body possibly devoured by Beasts, Birds or Fish, should reunite and be new formed ? let him only contemplate on the Power of that God, who in the Beginning by his All-creating Word, framed the stupendous Fabrick of the Universe out of Nothing ; his Astonishment will then naturally cease, and he will say with the Apostle, *Why should it be thought a Thing incredible with you, that God should raise the Dead?* Acts ch. xxvi. ver. 8. It is that God from whom we are taught we shall rise again, and that

that the Soul shall again be united to this identical Body, to which he will restore the Immortality it was deprived of by the Transgression of our first Parents : and as he is the God of Truth, Truth it self, his Word cannot fail us. This very Body shall be spiritualized, and together with the Soul enjoy eternal and unspeakable Blis, join the Choir of Celestial Angels, in their Hymns of endless Praise of the glorious and infinitely Beneficent Creator, and follow the Lamb where-soever he goeth, which that we may all attain to, may God of his infinite Mercy assist us with his Divine Grace, through the Merits of his blessed Son our Redeemer Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and Holy Ghost, be given all due Praise, Honour and Power, henceforth to all Eternity. *Amen.*—

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